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S E C R E T HAVANA 000182

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DEPT FOR D (CONAWAY), P, WHA A/S SHANNON  
WHA ALSO FOR PDAS KELLY, DAS MADISON, TRANSITION  
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINT](#) [CU](#) [US](#)  
SUBJECT: CUBA: LOOKING AHEAD TO 24 FEBRUARY -- SEEMINGLY  
ROUTINE, BUT UNPRECEDENTED IN MODERN CUBAN HISTORY

Classified By: COM MICHAEL E. PARMLY FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D

SUMMARY

11. (S) FEBRUARY 24 WILL, ON THE SURFACE, BE STRAIGHTFORWARD: SELECTION/CONFIRMATION OF WHO FIDEL AND RAUL WANT AS THE NEW CHIEF OF THE COUNCIL OF STATE, FOLLOWED BY NAMING OF THE CABINET. WHAT IS UNIQUE ON THIS OCCASION IS THAT THERE HAS NEVER BEEN SUCH A SELECTION WITHOUT FIDEL BEING FORMALLY IN CHARGE. FIDEL COULD REVERSE HIS 18 FEBRUARY "SHERMAN STATEMENT," AND HE IS CHARACTERISTICALLY TRYING TO MICRO-MANAGE THE TRANSITION, BUT WE ALREADY SEE HIS GRIP SLIPPING AS CUBANS HAVE STARTED MOVING ON. THE SPOTLIGHT IS ON RAUL. WE BELIEVE RAUL WILL ESCHEW FIDEL'S MEDIA-CONSCIOUS AND MONOPOLIZING STYLE OF RULE; THERE IS EVEN A GOOD CHANCE HE WILL NOT CLAIM THE SPOT HEADING THE COUNCIL OF STATE, AND RETURN TO HIS CONCENTRATION ON THE CUBAN MILITARY, GIVEN WAY TO MORE COLLEGIAL, IF STILL DICTATORIAL RULE. WHAT WE DO NOT EXPECT TO SEE RIGHT AWAY IS WHAT THE NEW CUBAN GOVERNMENT ORGANS WILL DO IN POWER, AND THE INABILITY -- OR UNWILLINGNESS -- OF RAUL TO LEAN STRONGLY TOWARDS ORTHODOXY OR IN THE DIRECTION OF REFORM MAY KEEP US GUESSING FOR A WHILE. HOWEVER, RAUL HAS LIFTED THE LID WITH HIS TALK OF THE NEED TO REFORM THE WAY CUBA WORKS, AND POPULAR EXPECTATION OF CONCRETE IMPROVEMENTS IN THEIR LIVES IS PUSHING GOVERNMENT POLICY LIKE IT NEVER HAS BEFORE IN THE 49-PLUS YEARS OF CASTRO'S REVOLUTION. WHILE IT WILL NOT BE TAKEN UP RIGHT AWAY, THE ISSUE OF DEALING WITH THE UNITED STATES WILL BECOME EVER MORE THE OBSESSION OF RAUL AND HIS TEAM. RAUL AND THOSE HE HELPS NAME ON 24 FEBRUARY WILL THUS FACE CHALLENGES UNPRECEDENTED IN MODERN CUBAN HISTORY. IF IT IS A TALL ORDER, IT IS OF HIS AND HIS BROTHER'S MAKING. END SUMMARY.

THE 24 FEBRUARY EVENT: STRAIGHTFORWARD

12. (SBU) WHAT HAPPENS IN HAVANA ON SUNDAY 2/24 IS AT FIRST GLANCE STRAIGHTFORWARD. "GRANMA" LAID IT OUT IN ITS 2/21 EDITION. THE 614 DELEGATES "ELECTED" ON JANUARY 20 WILL ASSEMBLE AT THE PALACIO DE CONVENCIONES (JUST DOWN THE ROAD FROM THE COM'S RESIDENCE). THE SESSION WILL BE PRESIDED OVER INITIALLY BY MARIA ESTHER REUS, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION. REUS WILL CERTIFY THE DELEGATES. THEN WILL COME TWO DECISIONS, SUPPOSEDLY VOTED ON BY ALL 614. FIRST, TO CHOOSE THE PRESIDENT OF THE ASSEMBLY (CURRENTLY RICARDO ALARCON), AS WELL AS VICE PRESIDENT AND SECRETARY OF THE ASSEMBLY. AND THEN, TO SELECT THE NEXT PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL OF STATE (CURRENTLY FIDEL), THE FIRST VICE PRESIDENT (CURRENTLY RAUL), OTHER VP'S (CURRENTLY FIVE -- COMANDANTE

JUAN ALMEIDA BOSQUE, CARLOS LAGE, ESTEBAN LAZO, JOSE RAMON MACHADO VENTURA, AND GEN ABELARDO COLOME IBARRA), AND THE REMAINING MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL (WE CURRENTLY COUNT 28 TOTAL MEMBERS). "GRANMA" DOES NOT THEN SPECIFY, BUT CUBAN CONTACTS TELL US THAT THE 24 FEBRUARY SESSION OF THE ASSEMBLY WILL ALSO CONFIRM THE MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNMENT; THERE ARE CURRENTLY 34 MEMBERS, INCLUDING FIDEL AND RAUL. THE SUNDAY SESSION IS NOT EXPECTED TO TAKE UP ANY FORMAL BUSINESS OTHER THAN THIS CONFIRMATION OF NAMES. DIPLOMATIC COLLEAGUES REPORT ALREADY GETTING INVITES TO WITNESS SOME OF THE SESSION. (WE AT USINT DO NOT, SURELY BECAUSE WE DO NOT HAVE FORMAL DIPLOMATIC PRESS RELATIONS WITH CUBA.) PRESS CONTACTS ARE HOPING PART OF THE SUNDAY SESSION WILL BE OPEN TO THEIR PRESENCE. (WE ARE HOPING IT IS AT LEAST TELEVISED.) THEN THEY ALL GO HOME. NO BIG DEAL, RIGHT?

WHAT WILL NOT HAPPEN ON SUNDAY: NO PARTY CHANGE, AND THAT'S IMPORTANT

13. (S) WELL, NOT EXACTLY. AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT WILL HAPPEN SUNDAY IS WHAT WILL NOT. THE PARTY STRUCTURE WILL NOT BE TOUCHED FOR NOW. ALL THAT WILL BE AFFECTED ON SUNDAY IS THE GOVERNMENT, WHEREAS THE KEY DECISION-MAKING BODY FOR NOW IS THE CUBAN COMMUNIST PARTY (PCC). FIDEL IS THE FIRST SECRETARY OF THAT BODY. IT IS NOTEWORTHY THAT IN HIS

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MUCH-TOUTED VERSION OF A "SHERMAN STATEMENT" OF 18 FEBRUARY, FIDEL ONLY TALKED ABOUT HIS ROLES AS PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL OF STATE AND HIS TITLE OF COMMANDER IN CHIEF. HE DID NOT RELINQUISH HIS ROLE AS FIRST SECRETARY OF THE PCC, AND HE REITERATED HIS TITLE AS EDITORIALIST IN CHIEF, SAYING THAT ALL SHOULD CONTINUE TO COUNT ON HIS "WEAPON" AS WHAT ONE LOCAL JOURNALIST CALLS "OP ED WRITER-IN-CHIEF." FIDEL HAS NEVER REALLY CARED ABOUT THE PARTY, PREFERRING A MORE PERSONALIST LEADERSHIP STYLE. THAT PARTLY EXPLAINS WHY THERE HAS BEEN NO PARTY CONGRESS FOR TEN YEARS. RAUL BY CONTRAST

HAS REPEATEDLY STATED IN THE PAST TWO YEARS A NEED FOR THE STRUCTURE OF THE PARTY. (THERE ARE CLEAR STEPS BEING TAKEN TOWARDS HOLDING A PARTY CONGRESS, AND WE WOULD EXPECT IT IN 2008: THE "CONSTITUENT BODIES" UNDER THE PCC UMBRELLA -- THE YOUTH ORGANIZATION, THE LABOR UNION, THE WRITERS AND ARTISTS UNION, THE WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION -- HAVE EITHER ALREADY HELD OR ARE PREPARING TO HOLD IN THE MONTHS AHEAD THEIR CONGRESSES, AN EXPECTED PRE-REQUISITE FOR THE FORMAL CONGRESS. BUT THAT IS NOT ON THE AGENDA FOR THIS COMING SUNDAY.) AND WHEREAS FIDEL CLAIMED ON 18 FEBRUARY TO BE RENOUNCING HIS "COMANDANTE EN JEFE" ROLE, THAT POSITION IS NOT SUBJECT TO ELECTION. THERE ARE FIVE INDIVIDUALS IN CUBA WHO CARRY THE TITLE OF COMANDANTE, BUT THERE HAS BEEN -- AND CUBANS ARE CONFIDENT, WILL FOREVER BE -- ONLY ONE COMANDANTE EN JEFE -- FIDEL. THAT JERSEY WILL BE RETIRED FOR GOOD.

WHY SUNDAY IS IMPORTANT: IN A WAY, IT'S A FIRST IN THE CONTEXT OF A GENERATIONAL CHANGE

14. (C) SO THAT MEANS SUNDAY WILL BE ANTI-CLIMACTIC, A TEMPEST IN A TEAPOT, OF INTEREST TO JOURNALISTS AND LEFTISTS THE WORLD OVER BUT WITH NO CONSEQUENCE FOR THE CUBAN PEOPLE, RIGHT? EVERYONE WE TALK TO HERE CLAIMS TO BE CYNICAL, WITH THE RHETORICAL QUESTION: "WHAT HAS THE GOVERNMENT DONE FOR ME LATELY?" ON THEIR LIPS, BUT EVEN THE CYNICS ARE WATCHING THIS ONE OUT OF THE CORNER OF THEIR EYE. FOR ONE THING, NEVER SINCE 1959 HAS THERE BEEN THE CIRCUMSTANCE OF NO FIDEL ACTUALLY RUNNING THINGS. THIS TIME IT LOOKS LIKE HE WON'T BE THERE. THUS ONE OF THE FIRST QUESTIONS TO BE SETTLED ON 24 FEBRUARY IS WHETHER FIDEL MEANT WHAT HE SAID ON 18 FEBRUARY. THERE IS A REMOTE CHANCE FIDEL WOULD ENGINEER A DRAFT, TO STROKE HIS EGO IF NOTHING ELSE, BUT MOST BETTING -- AND OUR BET -- IS THAT HIS WORDS MEANT SOMETHING, THAT HE REALLY DOES PLAN TO SHIFT ROLES. THE PREDICTABLE MESSAGES OF ADULATION AND PRAISE OF FIDEL'S 2/18 ANNOUNCEMENT -- EVERY DAY'S NEWSPAPER BRINGS ANOTHER SLEW OF THEM -- ALL STOP SHORT OF BEGGING HIM TO STAY ON. THE REGIME'S OWN POLLING REPORTS ARE, WE ARE CERTAIN, BRINGING BACK WHAT WE ARE HEARING: THAT NOBODY REALLY CARES THAT FIDEL IS GOING. AND EVEN IF FIDEL

IS STILL AROUND IN PCC AND EDITORIAL WRITER MODES, HIS ROLE HAS CLEARLY DECLINED SINCE HIS JULY 31, 2006 "PROCLAMA". FIDEL'S OWN STATED SENSE OF HIS ROLE REMAINS THAT OF INSPIRER AND SAGE. WE HAVE SEEN HIM MORE AS A CHECK ON THINGS GOING OFF THE IDEOLOGICALLY PURE, ORTHODOX TRACK. HIS ABILITY TO EXERCISE THAT ROLE WILL DIMINISH WITH THE SHIFT IN INSTITUTIONAL TITLES.

RAUL'S CORONATION? NOT FOR SOMEONE SEEKING A MORE COLLEGIAL STYLE OF MANAGING

15. (C) SO WILL THIS BE RAUL'S CORONATION? WE DON'T THINK SO, NOT AS SUCH, NEITHER IN A PERSONAL SENSE NOR IN POLICY TERMS, AND FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS. HISTORICALLY, BUT ESPECIALLY SINCE THE JULY 31, 2006 PROCLAMA, RAUL HAS SOUGHT TO PROJECT A DIFFERENT STYLE: MUCH MORE UNDERSTATED, MUCH LESS FLASHY THAN HIS BROTHER FIDEL. HE HAS EVEN SAID AS MUCH PUBLICLY ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION IN THE PAST 19 MONTHS. THE NARCISSISM OF FIDEL IS NOT RAUL'S STYLE. MORE IMPORTANTLY, WHEN IT COMES TO THE CIRCLE OF POWER, RAUL PREFERS IT WIDER AND LESS UNI-CENTERED THAN FIDEL. PROOF? HIS PUSHING THROUGH IN MID-2006 THE RESTORATION OF THE PCC CENTRAL COMMITTEE "SECRETARIAT," SOMETHING FIDEL HAD LONG ESCHEWED. RAUL CLEARLY FEELS HE NEEDS THAT KIND OF HELP. THE COMPOSITION OF THE SECRETARIAT ALSO POINTS TO THE MANAGEMENT PATH WE WOULD EXPECT A RAUL-LED REGIME TO FOLLOW. LIKE A BRIDE HEADING TO THE ALTAR, RAUL'S 12-PERSON SECRETARIAT HOLDS SOMETHING OLD AND SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING BORROWED... YOU GET OUR POINT. THERE ARE OLD-TIME/OLD-THINK HARD-LINERS LIKE MACHADO VENTURA AND ESTEBAN LAZO (AS WELL AS FIDEL HIMSELF) AND YOUNGER, REPORTEDLY RELATIVELY MORE OPEN-MINDED FIGURES SUCH AS CENTRAL COMMITTEE INTERNATIONAL SECRETARY FERNANDO REMIREZ DE ESTENOZ AND TRANSPORT MINISTER JORGE SIERRA. LOOK FOR HETEROGENEITY, NOT HOMOGENEITY.

WHEN WILL WE SEE CHANGES, IF ANY? NOT RIGHT AWAY

16. (S) OKAY THEN, SO WE WILL SEE BIG CHANGES RIGHT AWAY, CORRECT? WELL, NOT EXACTLY. WE SEE RAUL BIDDING HIS TIME, AGAIN FOR SEVERAL REASONS. FIRST, BECAUSE HE IS CAUTIOUS BY NATURE, AND HAS ALWAYS BEEN, SINCE THE SIERRA MAESTRA CAMPAIGNS OF THE LATE 1950S. SECOND, BECAUSE HIS BROTHER IS STILL AROUND, AND RAUL FEARS WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED TO HIM SEVERAL TIMES: GETTING HIS WRISTS SLAPPED BY FIDEL (E.G., ON RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES). THIRD AND PROBABLY MOST

IMPORTANT, BECAUSE RAUL DOES NOT DOMINATE THE PCC OR THE GOC LIKE FIDEL, ABLE TO IMPOSE A DECISION WITH THE FLICK OF A PEN OR THE GLARE OF A FACE-TO-FACE MEETING. WE DO SEE UNMISTAKEABLE SIGNS OF AN INCREASINGLY FRACTIOUS LEADERSHIP IN CUBA. IN THE ECONOMIC FIELD, ALL-IMPORTANT GIVEN THE INTENSE PRESSURE THE REGIME IS UNDER TO PRODUCE TANGIBLE RESULTS FOR THE POPULATION, THE ORTHODOX CROWD (MACHADO VENTURA, BALAGUER, LAZO, CENTRAL BANK HEAD SOBERON, AMONG OTHERS) WANT TO STICK WITH TRIED-AND-TRUE METHODS OF CENTRAL PLANNING AND CENTRAL CONTROL, WHILE OTHERS, REPORTEDLY INCLUDING RAUL HIMSELF IF WE ARE TO BELIEVE HIS 26 JULY SPEECH, RECOGNIZE THAT THE MACHINE IS IRREMEDIABLY BROKEN AND NEEDS TO BE OVERHAULED. ON FOREIGN POLICY, THERE ARE THOSE (A DECIDED MINORITY) WHO WANT TO STAY WITH VENEZUELA WHILE OTHERS, TO INCLUDE -- WE BELIEVE -- RAUL HIMSELF WANT TO RELY MORE ON OTHERS SUCH AS BRAZIL AND MEXICO. CATHOLIC CHURCH AND DIPLOMATIC COLLEAGUES TELL US THE SPLITS EVEN EXTEND TO AS SENSITIVE AN AREA AS HUMAN RIGHTS, WHERE THE HARD-LINERS SAY "KEEP THE DISSIDENTS IN JAIL FOR DECADES" WHILE OTHERS ARGUE FOR GETTING CUBA OUT FROM UNDER THE BURDEN OF A LARGE POLITICAL PRISONER POPULATION BY RELEASING SOME, IF NOT ALL. CARDINAL ORTEGA, WHO HAS NEGOTIATED HUMAN RIGHTS WITH THE GOC, HAS TOLD US IN THE PAST HE SEES ALL THE POLITICAL PRISONERS AS "FIDEL'S." WELL, SOMEONE HAD TO BE NEGOTIATING WITH THE SPANIARDS ON THE RELEASE OF THE FOUR LAST WEEK, AND JURISTS IN THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMUNITY, AS WELL AS CHURCH FIGURES, HAVE PASSED ON RUMORS OF MORE RELEASES IN THE WAKE OF THE CURRENT VISIT OF VATICAN SECRETARY OF STATE BERTONE. SOMEBODY IN THE GOC IS CLEARLY ARGUING FOR THE APPEARANCE OF A DIFFERENT LINE ON HUMAN RIGHTS. THIRD, THERE ARE THE NUMEROUS MILITARY AND FORMER MILITARY COLLEAGUES IDENTIFIED AND GROOMED BY RAUL IN HIS MILITARY ROLE. THAT SECTOR IS

MOST OPAQUE, AND WITH RARE EXCEPTIONS, WE DO NOT HAVE ANY HANDLE ON WHERE THEY COME DOWN ON POLICY ISSUES. FROM WHAT WE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO DISCERN, HOWEVER, IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE TO CALL THE MILITARY REFORM-MINDED. AS A GROUP, THEY, LIKE RAUL HIMSELF, FAVOR EFFICIENCY AND CONTROL, AND NOT NECESSARILY IN THAT ORDER. THOSE UNIFORMED OFFICERS TO WHOM RAUL HAS GIVEN BROADER ECONOMIC/BUSINESS RESPONSIBILITIES ARE THEMSELVES A MIXED BAG, FROM REPORTEDLY CORRUPT (CASAS REGUIERO) TO DRACONIAN DISCIPLINARIANS, AND THOSE TWO SCHOOLS ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE. WHAT APPEARS TO CHARACTERIZE THE MILITARY OFFICIALS WHOSE ADVANCEMENT TO THE TOP RAUL HAS PROMOTED IS A FIRM LOYALTY TO RAUL HIMSELF.

RAUL: TRYING TO MAINTAIN CONTROL OF AN INCREASINGLY EFFERVESCENT SITUATION

17. (C) IS LOYALTY THE ONLY THING RAUL IS LOOKING FOR? NO, IT IS MORE THAN THAT. RAUL AND HIS CRONIES ARE IN A DIFFERENT POSITION THAT FIDEL EVER WAS, AND FACE A BIGGER CHALLENGE THAN ANY FACED BY THE REVOLUTION SINCE 1959. IT IS NOT THAT THINGS WERE BETTER BEFORE WITH FIDEL RUNNING THINGS, BUT FIDEL DOMINATED THE SCENE IN WAYS RAUL AND COMPANY CAN ONLY DREAM OF. IT IS LIKE WITH THE QUESTION OF WHO CAN SUCCEED FIDEL AS COMANDANTE EN JEFE. THE ANSWER IS NOBODY. THE STATE OF THE CUBAN ECONOMY -- IN TERMS OF THE PERSONAL ECONOMIES OF YOUR EVERYDAY CUBAN CITIZENS, NOT THE MACRO NUMBERS BATTED AROUND BY THE REGIME PROPOGANDISTS -- HAS NEVER BEEN LOWER. THAT IS A SUBJECTIVE JUDGMENT OF CUBANS, BUT IT IS THE ONE THAT COUNTS. EVIDENCE AND THE RARE RELIABLE GOVERNMENT STATISTIC POINT TO THINGS BEING SLIGHTLY BETTER IN SOME SECTORS THAN IN THE RECENT PAST, AND CERTAINLY SINCE THE SPECIAL PERIOD OF THE 1990S. THERE HAVE BEEN SLIGHT IMPROVEMENTS IN URBAN TRANSPORT, AND THERE ARE NUMEROUS REPORTS OF THE CUBAN STATE PAYING FARMERS FOR PAST PRODUCTION. CUBAN NEWSPAPERS REPORT THAT OBESITY, NOT HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION, IS NOW THE MAIN PROBLEM OF CUBANS. THAT DOES NOT MATTER TO THE AVERAGE CUBAN, HOWEVER. THEIR PERCEPTION IS THAT THEIR OWN PERSONAL LIFE HAS NOT GOTTEN BETTER, AND INCREASINGLY, THEY ARE SAYING SO OUT LOUD. CUBANS ARE GENERALLY AWARE OF HOW MUCH BETTER LIFE OUTSIDE CUBA IS, EITHER THROUGH RADIO MARTI OR OTHER PRESS SOURCES, OR THROUGH CONTACT WITH FAMILY OFF THE ISLAND. REGIME PROPAGANDA THAT CUBA IS DOING WELL IS PERCEIVED AS JUST THAT: TALK. RAUL AND COMPANY ARE CAUGHT IN THE VICE OF A REVOLUTION OF RISING EXPECTATIONS, AND IF CUBANS HAVE MORE HOPE THESE DAYS, IT IS BECAUSE THEY SEE FIDEL ON HIS WAY OUT; AND BECAUSE RAUL HAS HIMSELF SPOKEN OF THE NEED FOR THINGS TO GET BETTER, MOST DRAMATICALLY LAST JULY 26 BUT ACROSS THE ISLAND IN THE MONTHS SINCE THEN. IT IS NOT AN ENVIABLE POSITION FOR ANY GOVERNMENT, ESPECIALLY ONE WITH FEW RESOURCES AND LITTLE LEGITIMACY TO FALL BACK ON. RAUL KNOWS HE HAS TO GET HIS SUPPORT THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY: HE HAS TO

EARN IT. NOT EASY WITH A MACHINE AS BROKEN AS HIS.

BACK TO 24 FEBRUARY: NOT YET AN ISSUE OF WHAT, BUT WHO

18. (C) SO WHERE DOES THE REGIME GO? IT TRIES TO KEEP THINGS HANGING TOGETHER, MAKING DEALS WITH FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS AND COMPANIES TO FILL THE POCKETS OF THE FAVORED FEW, AND MOST OF ALL, DOING THE NECESSARY TO RETAIN POWER. THAT REQUIRES, IN THE FIRST INSTANCE, THE RIGHT PEOPLE, NAMELY RAUL'S PEOPLE. RAUL IS BEING CAREFUL NOT TO ALIENATE PRECIPITOUSLY FIDEL'S CRONIES, BUT HE EVINCES NO AFFECTION FOR THEM, AND WE HAVE HEARD RUMORS, ORIGINATING ON THE ISLAND EVEN IF FILTERED THROUGH OFF-ISLAND COMMUNITIES, OF THE LIKES OF ALARCON, MACAHDO VENTURA, FELIPE PEREZ ROQUE AND OTHERS ON THE WAY OUT. RAUL'S CAUTION MAY DICTATE THAT HE ONLY UNDERTAKE SOME SHAKE-UPS GRADUALLY, SAY, OVER THE NEXT SIX MONTHS, AND NOT ALL AT ONCE. IN ANY EVENT, THAT IS WHAT SUNDAY IS ALL ABOUT.

WHAT THE OFFICIALS DO ONCE CONFIRMED OR CARRIED OVER IN OFFICE IS ANOTHER MATTER, BUT THEY DO NOT HAVE ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD. ON THE CONTRARY, THEY NEED TO PRODUCE RESULTS IN FAIRLY SHORT ORDER IF THEY WANT TO HOLD OFF WHAT CARDINAL JAIME ORTEGA FEELS ARE THE IMPATIENT MOBS. THAT ABOVE ALL ELSE IS THE INEXORABLE PRESSURE FOR CHANGE. REGIME PROPAGANDISTS BOAST OF IMPROVING TIES WITH OTHER COUNTRIES, AND IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS, THERE HAVE BEEN SIGNS OF MARKED



IMPROVEMENT WITH BRAZIL AND MEXICO. THAT IS USEFUL FOR THE U.S., TO THE EXTENT IT HOLDS THE PROSPECT OF FREEING CUBA'S HAND FROM THE UNILATERAL GRIP OF THE ERRATIC VENEZUELA. FIDEL WAS CONTENT WITH CHAVEZ AS PRINCIPAL PARTNER; RAUL IS CLEARLY LOOKING ELSEWHERE, AND AS MUCH AS HE CLAIMS IT IS NOT THE CASE, HE HAS ANOTHER GOAL: A MODUS VIVENDI WITH THE UNITED STATES. FOR SOMEONE WHO REPORTEDLY HAS ONLY EVER BEEN IN THE UNITED STATES ONCE (IN 1960 IN HOUSTON), RAUL'S OBSESSION WITH US IS UNUSUAL. NONETHELESS, HIS REGULAR MENTION OF A DESIRE FOR NORMALIZED TIES WITH WASHINGTON, EVEN IF COUCHED IN OH-SO-CUBAN PUFFING UP OF CHESTS AND RECITATIONS OF "I DON'T NEED YOU," IS REAL.

WASHINGTON: STILL CANNOT FIGURE US OUT

19. (C) THE REGIME WOULD BE STUNNED IF IN THE WAKE OF 24 FEBRUARY IT WERE TO RECEIVE A CONGRATULATORY NOTE FROM THE U.S. THERE IS LITTLE IT WOULD WANT MORE. RAUL AND CO. KNOW THEY LACK LEGITIMACY. THEY CAN WHISTLE PAST THE GRAVEYARD ALL THEY WANT, BUT THEY, UNLIKE THE LEGEND OF FIDEL, HAVE NO STORIES WITH WHICH TO BACK UP THEIR POSITION. CERTAINLY NOT ECONOMIC, BEYOND THE CURRENT PRICE OF NICKEL AND THE HOPES DOWN THE ROAD OF OIL AND GAS OFF THE NORTH COAST. DIPLOMATIC? WELL YES, TO SOME EXTENT, BUT THEY ARE SO INSECURE THEY FRET EVERY TIME AN ISSUE ARISES IN INTERNATIONAL CIRCLES AND THEY HAVE AN INTEREST AT STAKE. THE UNITED STATES REMAINS CUBA'S OBSESSION, THAT OFTEN DEFIES COMPARISONS. WITH MEXICO, FOR EXAMPLE, THE CUBANS HAVE A FINITE (THREE) LIST OF IDENTIFIABLE ISSUES, AND APPEAR TO BE RESOLVING THEM, ONE BY ONE, IN A METHODOICAL WAY. WITH THE U.S., THE CLASH IS MORE EXISTENTIAL, BECAUSE OF WHAT WE REPRESENT IN THEIR HISTORY AND THEIR PRESENT. RAUL KNOWS HE DOES NOT HAVE A VERY STRONG HAND, ESPECIALLY WITH A RESTLESS POPULATION. THE CUBANS ARE AMAZED AT OUR PERSISTENT LOYALTY TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY CLUSTER OF ISSUES, AS THEY ARE BY THE COURAGE OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY DEFENDERS ON THE ISLAND AND THE GROWING NUMBERS OF AVERAGE CUBANS WILLING TO SPEAK OUT. HOWEVER, HELPED BY THE FLANKING (IF UNEVEN) PRESSURE FROM EUROPEANS AND OTHERS, SOME CUBAN OFFICIALS HAVE STARTED TO GET THE MESSAGE, AS WITNESSED BY THE DEALS WITH THE SPANISH AND RUMORED ARRANGEMENTS WITH THE VATICAN. 24 FEBRUARY, UNLESS FIDEL DOES A SUDDEN ABOUT-FACE AND INSISTS ON RE-EMERGING, WILL BE RAUL'S MOST IMPORTANT STEP TOWARDS SETTING A NEW PATH FOR CUBA. ABOVE ALL, IT WILL PROVIDE HIM WITH A BASIS TO MOVE FORWARD. WE BELIEVE HE WANTS TO BECAUSE HE KNOWS HE HAS TO. HOW FAR HE CAN GO WHILE STILL RETAINING HIS CONTROL IS THE QUESTION THAT NEITHER HE NOR WE CAN ANSWER. AS MUCH AS HE DISLIKES COMPARISONS WITH ANY OTHER COUNTRY, HE APPEARS TO BE HEADING DOWN A GORBACHEV PATH OF GLASNOST (MARGINAL FREEDOMS IN THE CULTURAL REALM AND EYE-DROPPER RELEASES OF POLITICAL PRISONERS). IF HE GETS TO START TO PUT IN THOSE PEOPLE HE WANTS ON 24 FEBRUARY, RAUL MIGHT BE TEMPTED TO TRY A LITTLE PERESTROIKA IN THE ECONOMIC AND MANAGEMENT AREAS. THEN HE AND HIS COHORTS BELIEVE THEY WILL BE ABLE TO MANAGE THE PRESSURE FOR CHANGE. THEY MAY BE RIGHT, BUT WE WOULD NOT BET ON IT. CUBANS ARE RESTLESS, IF REALISTIC PEOPLE. WHEN THEY SENSE THAT CHANGE IS IN THE AIR, THEY WILL KEEP PRESSING FOR IT.

PARMLY